

INFORMATION-PSYCHOLOGICAL OPERATIONS OF RUSSIA IN THE "GLOBAL SOUTH" STATES

Author:

Anton Kucherenko

Information flows become an integral tool of political activity in the conditions of accelerated technologization. Those who feel, pick up, and implant narratives – control public opinion. Under such circumstances, the role of information manipulations grows. Despite the myriad of similar means, one of the forms is the so-called information-psychological operations (PSYOP). It is a relatively inexpensive means of creating a comfortable information climate. Playing with the interests of society allows shaping the attitudes of political elites, i.e., those layers involved in decision-making at the highest level.

Recently, traditional communication channels have begun to lose their leading position in the information space. Instead, means that previously lacked significant authority or were outright rejected take the initiative. In particular, social networks, combined with the effective use of cyber tools, are gaining increasing popularity among states with a clear anti-Western orientation. One of the most effective information manipulators in the modern world is the Russian Federation. The extensive and flexible propaganda system has allowed Russia, at least in the media field, to build the image of a global state with no less than planetary ambitions.

Information-psychological operations have various applications. Despite the inflation of narratives, PSYOPs allow both countering informational attacks since the media field is an extension of the global hybrid war front. Suppressing messages in the media has become an integral part of Russian propaganda in the context of the war in Ukraine since 2014. Even against the backdrop of all the nightmares of full-scale invasion, atrocities, and scandals, the Kremlin and its affiliated media manage to maintain popular support even in countries where Russia does not implement broad humanitarian or cultural-enlightenment programs.

A crucial political-geographic segment of Russian propaganda activity is the region of the Global South. There are numerous reasons for the effectiveness of anti-Western narratives in this geopolitical space, but the majority boils down to transformative processes in the international relations system. The collective West is losing influence, and the vacuum is filled by opposing states or situational anti-Western alliances.

The System of Russia's Informational Propaganda: General Overview

The flourishing of Russian destructive activity in the media is counted from 2014; it is precisely this year that marked the beginning of the hybrid confrontation between Russia and the collective West. Quite recently, this confrontation received a clear documentary formulation. At the end of March 2023, the Kremlin approved the "Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", which became a response to the Western sanctions policy for the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the recognition of Russia as a "sharp threat" in the 2022 U.S. National Defense Strategy¹.

"The Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation", on the other hand, gives separate attention to the disclosure of national interests of Russia, in particular, in the field of information security. One of the points (under number 5)² indicates such a side of Kremlin's national concern: *the development of a secure information environment, protecting Russian society from destructive information-psychological influence*. In fact, this entails consolidating media fortifications against the penetration of Western informational content. This same point inevitably intersects with Russia's primary national interest, outlined in concept number 1: *the protection of the constitutional system, sovereignty, independence, state and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation from destructive foreign influence*³.

The leading role of protection and advocacy of Russian interests in the realm of information policy is assigned to **state media**, the core of which is the International Information Agency "Russia Today". Founded media group based on the decree of the President of Russia dated December 9, 2013, regarding the reorganization of Russian media for increased efficiency⁴. On the basis of "Russia Today", several dozen diverse information platforms operate, but the greatest reach abroad has been achieved by the channel under the brand RT and the agency Sputnik, which have foreign representations and foreign branches. The mentioned platforms position themselves as independent media, but do not meet the criteria of such. Information about the sources and volumes of media group funding is still not available in open access, and behind seven locks, data on the hierarchy of leadership and higher levels of the managerial staff, except for the positions of the CEO (Dmitry Kiselyov) and the chief editor (Margarita Simonyan), remains hidden.

Another side of the Russian propaganda system is **foreign proxy sources and influencers abroad**. Russian media willingly create situational long-term alliances. In particular, there is knowledge of a conditional 'Russian-Bolivarian' alliance between the Venezuelan channel Telesur and the Spanish-language branch of RT (Actualidad RT), as well as cooperation with

¹ National defense strategy of the United States of America 2022

² The concept of the foreign policy of the Russian Federation (approved by the President of the Russian Federation V.V. Putin on March 31, 2023).

³ Look previous

⁴ The decree of the President of Russia "On certain measures regarding the improvement of the efficiency of the activities of state mass media" on December 9, 2013.

the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) or the Chinese CCTV. Platforms in critical moments (elections, popular uprisings, military coups) unite efforts for the collective promotion of anti-Western narratives abroad: they exchange informational content, launch attacks against unfavorable figures or national politicians, and instigate collective surges of bot accounts on social networks.

The formation of a *pool of influencers abroad* has a close connection with Russian law enforcement agencies and intelligence. Some contacts with pro-Russian individuals date back to the times of the Soviet Union. Influencers can be well-known political and public figures, journalists, activists, and business representatives. The coordination of certain segments of Russian influencers abroad is carried out by pro-Kremlin Russian and foreign intellectuals who have significant popularity in anti-Western circles (Aleksandr Dugin, Luc Michel, Kemi Seba, Nathalie Yamb, and others). Sometimes these ideologue-connections form complete networks of anti-Western and pro-Russian disinformation under the patronage of special services or Kremlin-affiliated oligarchs. Despite the focus primarily on informational means, these networks are also involved in the process of recruiting Russian mercenaries (Vladimir Shkunov in Cuba). Under the banner of well-known Russian intellectuals, analytical centers are opened, which do not differ in any way from institutions of ideological indoctrination. Broad engagement of voices abroad is also facilitated by massive educational programs for foreigners, deployed as early as the Soviet years for students of "people's democracy" countries (former socialist bloc). In addition to technical specialists, the USSR provided quotas for training foreigners in military academies, which allowed establishing contacts even with leading military cliques abroad (President of Angola João Lourenço).

At the level of the mentioned means of information policy, Russia also succeeds in cyberactivity. Russian *technological companies in the field of computer technologies*, such as Yandex or Kaspersky Lab (in 2022, it entered the Expert Council under the government of the Russian Federation, allowing Kaspersky Lab to become part of the Russian information security network), occupy an important place. The mentioned technological giants suffered significantly from Western sanctions policy against Russia, which intensified in 2022. Companies lost a considerable market share in the European Union and the United States but redirected their main activity to so-called friendly countries, particularly within the Global South.

At the same time, Russia fully utilizes internet opportunities for promoting its own disinformation and propaganda. Popular social networks such as Meta, X, Telegram, WhatsApp, and others play an important role in this area. In Telegram, a whole network of channels on African and Middle Eastern themes operates, the connection of which is revealed in similar narratives, mutual promotion, and names that are altered titles of well-known movies and books – "Over the Abyss in Sudan", "Fear and Loathing in Bamako", "Turkish Gambit", "Sink to the Bottom in Bangui", and so on. In regions where the internet penetration

rate is low, Russia tries to establish control over radio stations (Radio Lengo Sengo in the CAR, financed by the company Lobaye Invest, associated with Prigozhin).

A special role is played by *private disinformation groups*. This cohort includes well-known pro-Kremlin oligarchs and media magnates (such as Konstantin Malofeev through the media group "Tsargrad TV") as well as non-systemic elements of Russian politics (Yevgeny Prigozhin). Under the auspices of these groups, analytical centers are created, which, in form, do not differ from classical think tanks but, upon closer examination, exhibit a clear anti-Western bias in publications and research. Examples include Konstantin Malofeev's "Katechon" or Prigozhin's "AFRIC" (which provided political consulting services to African leaders or directly intervened in elections, as in Madagascar). The structures of the former head of the PMC Wagner are also known for launching a notorious Internet Research Agency with numerous networks of trolls. In addition to destructive activities in the media, Yevgeny Prigozhin's companies focused on producing popular propaganda, especially films ("Granite" – about the involvement of PMC Wagner mercenaries in the failed suppression of Islamists in Cabo Delgado Province, Mozambique; "Tourist" – about the activities of Russian militants and instructors in the CAR), as well as a series of anti-Western cartoons (caricatures of French military personnel participating in the counter-terrorism operations "Serval" and "Barkhane" (2013-2022)).

A serious tool for the success of Russian propaganda abroad is *official political structures of authorities*, starting with the president (who is generally portrayed by propaganda as a central figure in the contemporary world's anti-Western movement), the government (Russia's Ministry of Defense sponsored the filming of "Heaven" about the participation of Russian Aerospace Forces in the civil war in Syria), embassies, and religious institutions (primarily the Russian Orthodox Church).

The peculiarity of the diplomatic corps of the Russian Federation is its professionalism – the vast majority of heads of diplomatic institutions are career diplomats who speak the local languages of the host country, always having a close relationship with local media. On the other hand, diplomats have close ties with Russian special services and law enforcement agencies, which also represent strategic groups of Russian business and the national economy (Igor Sechin, formerly the shadow leader of the Kremlin's power structures and the current president of the oil and gas company Rosneft; Sergey Ivanov Jr. – ALROSA).

The Russian Orthodox Church, in turn, operates not only in the near abroad of Russia and the former Soviet bloc. This can be seen in the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Central African Republic (entire Christian parishes come under the jurisdiction of the Russian Orthodox Church, local priests consecrate Wagner PMC militants) and Madagascar (under the auspices of the Russian Orthodox Church, Orthodox prayer books began to be published in Malagasy). However, currently, Russian church expansion in Africa has slowed down. In early October 2023, the exarch of the Russian Orthodox Church on the continent,

Metropolitan Leonid, was dismissed from his position. Most likely, within the purges of Prigozhin's associates after his death and the struggle for control over his business empire, this will become the leitmotif of the upcoming "post-Prigozhin" period of Russian presence in Africa.

Global South, Russia, and Information-Psychological Operations (PSYOP): Features, Approaches, Goals

Information-Psychological Operations (PSYOPS) are coordinated measures of comprehensive influence on the human psyche through means of information pressure. Important features include who, when, and under what conditions becomes a victim of information-psychological operations. PSYOPS aims to change the moods of specific human populations to control them or situationally disrupt societal tone, which can lead to public disturbances, seed panic moods, or shift attention focus. PSYOPS engineers must understand the target audience for their destructive operation. It is crucial to identify what specific populations want, what they fear, whom they hate, and whom they trust. PSYOPS often interacts with deep human intuitive fears to make a specific disinformation narrative trigger reflexively. The main goal of PSYOPS is to quickly transition between the perception of misinformation and its internalization. If an PSYOPS product starts raising many questions and doubts in the audience, it is unsuccessful.

The Russian strategy of destructive propaganda and information-psychological operations is called "The firehose of falsehood"⁵. The key features of it are the following: 1 – multichannelity; 2 – speed, repeatability, streamability; 3 – ignoring objective reality and facts; 4 – impartiality towards sequence; 5 – adaptability to the environment.

Multichannelity is represented in the quantity and variety of sources that disseminate misinformation. The more often a certain narrative emerges in the mass media, the more chances someone will buy into it. It's also important that the sources spreading misinformation provide diverse arguments that, nevertheless, lead to the same conclusion. Under such conditions, victims of information-psychological operations (PSYOPS) have the impression that they independently gathered positions from various sources and formed their own logical conclusion based on this. In turn, the diversity of sources allows PSYOPS engineers to clutter the information space with various false assumptions and versions. This stream suppresses real facts under a pile of misinformation. Something similar to what Russian media tried to do regarding the tragedy of flight "MH-17", which pro-Russian militants shot down in July 2014.

⁵ The Russian "Firehose of Falsehood" Propaganda Model

In the technique of spreading misinformation, the timing of publications is important because the first information message is perceived best, even if it is a lie. Russian resources are not constrained by the need to verify information, so it is natural that their passages will start cluttering the media space earlier. Russian propaganda benefits from the fact that its resources appear like entirely ordinary media outlets. At first glance at the design of an information website or channel, it creates the impression of authoritative media. RT to a lesser extent, but Sputnik often interviews well-known current politicians, which only adds weight to it at the superficial acquaintance stage.

Adaptability to the environment is an important characteristic of an information-psychological operation, as it's impossible to effectively spread narratives that won't resonate with an unprepared audience's consciousness. This is what makes Russian media so popular in the Global South space, especially in its most anti-Western segments. Russian sources of misinformation employ hybrid methods, combining official media platforms, bot farms, social media armament, and cyber espionage.

It's important to understand that the Global South, in its entirety, is not an anti-Western format of cooperation, as some countries within this club have fairly close relations with the USA, the European Union, and Japan. And such countries exist in each of the four subregions of the Global South: Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Oceania. Therefore, the Global South is more of a non-Western project, which can equally be termed non-Eastern. Furthermore, the bipolar view of the world inherited from the past is outdated for the 21st century. The modern geopolitical map is colored in different shades, sometimes with unclear boundaries.

However, even in such conditions, there are segments of the regional space where the dominance of certain states is unquestionably perceived. Russia's foreign policy has allowed it to increase its popularity in anti-Western countries of the Global South through means of information pressure, which, along with economic ties and the export of hybrid power, help secure necessary influence. From region to region, differences in approaches to Russia's information policy are observed, indicating flexibility inherent in the propaganda model, as well as the fact that various structures conducted specialized regional information work: private, state-owned, and in some cases, a comprehensive format.

At the core of Russia's foreign policy activity lie national interests, which can be broadly understood. However, looking more narrowly, all the Kremlin's activities are aimed at strengthening political and economic sovereignty while eliminating those considered a threat to Russia. This leads to rather aggressive methods in conducting information policy, both with smaller neighbors and powerful global players.

The African Context of Russia's Information-Psychological Operations

An indicator of Russia's influence in African countries is the reaction of the continental community to the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine in February 2022. According to the results of the UN resolution vote on March 2, 2022, demanding the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Ukrainian territory, out of the 35 abstaining countries, 17 were African. Among the five that voted against, one was African – Eritrea. Therefore, it can be concluded that African countries formed the backbone of the opposition to the UN resolution against Russia, although they remained in the minority. Russia's calling card on the continent was the "Russia-Africa" forum held in 2019 and 2023.

Russia's positions in Africa were particularly strong during the Cold War, but with the collapse of the USSR, cooperation levels significantly declined. Things began to improve in the late '90s to the early 2000s when Moscow increasingly entered the regional arms trade market and revived collaboration on various industrial projects on the continent.

The goals of Russia's penetration into Africa are:

- 1 – avoiding isolation and easing sanctions pressure;
- 2 – replacing the positions of Western countries, which are already losing influence on the continent (primarily France);
- 3 – gaining access to strategic ports, communication lines, and smuggling routes;
- 4 – securing lucrative contracts in the extraction of natural resources.

The scale of Russian influence on Africa's information space is enormous. According to the "African Center for Strategic Studies" estimates, between 2014 and 2022, African countries experienced 23 significant disinformation campaigns, with 16 of them being linked to Russia⁶.

Instead, since 2019, Russian cyber specialists have intervened in elections in at least eight African countries⁷. Among them were Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, and Libya.

Means of penetration:

- 1 – informational (official media, such as "RT" and "Sputnik"; unofficial – troll factories and bot farms; support for local authoritative voices and media);

⁶ Mapping disinformation in Africa. African center for strategic studies

⁷ Security, Soft Power and Regime Support: Spheres of Russian Influence in Africa. Tony Blair Institute for global change

2 – economically oriented (private companies involved in natural resource extraction: CAR – "Lobaye Invest", Sudan – "Meroe Gold", Mozambique and Libya – "Rosneft", DRC, Angola, and Zimbabwe – "ALROSA", Guinea – "RUSAL");

3 – combined (a combination of methods of informational influence, economic orientation, and the use of force – various structures of Yevgeny Prigozhin).

The role of authoritative anti-Western voices in Africa is very high, as some figures, whom Russia managed to attract to its side, are considered somewhat messianic. Primarily, Kemi Seba – a black nationalist, a migrant from Benin who grew up in France and is now engaged in pro-African civilizational proselytism from harsh anti-French positions. Natalie Yamb – an activist of Cameroonian origin, born in Switzerland, opposes France's activities in Africa. Chris Yapi – an activist and media personality from Ivory Coast, denied the massacre in Bucha. Justin Tagouh – Ivorian who runs the pro-Russian channel "Afrique Média". Seth Viredu – a Ghanaian, head of a local pro-Russian troll factory, played a priest in the propaganda film "The Tourist"; Muhammadu Buhari – former president of Nigeria, who claimed that Western weapons from Ukraine end up in Africa.

The penetration of Russia into the Central African Republic in 2017, under the UN sanctions, which lifted the embargo on the export of light weapons from Russia and allowed sending up to 175 instructors to prepare the armed forces of the CAR to resist Muslim rebels from the Seleka group, became significant for Russia. These instructors, dubbed "tourists" in the media, were mostly mercenaries from the PMC Wagner, who had previously shown themselves during the civil war in Syria on the side of pro-Assad forces and on the side of Russian forces in eastern Ukraine. The intervention of Russian mercenaries in the CAR turned out to be generally successful, so after the relative stabilization of the country, structures of Yevgeny Prigozhin began to implement civil initiatives aimed at improving Russia's image. In the CAR, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church entered, propagandists also shot the film "The Tourist", and for the first time in a long time, the country held a beauty contest, where a speech was delivered by Valery Zakharov (advisor to CAR President Faustin-Archange Touadéra on national security and Prigozhin's creature).

On the crest of the Wagnerians' success in the CAR, mercenaries decided to apply them also in other regions of Africa. The places of the next deployment were chosen to be Mozambique and Libya – both interventions generally did not have military success. In Mozambique, where an Islamist uprising broke out, Wagnerians suffered losses and retreated, although their main goal was to alienate insurgents from oil-rich regions. Despite the failure, the involvement of Wagnerians in suppressing the uprising was turned into a myth. As a result, in 2021, the film "Granite" was released worldwide.

The popularity of Russian mass media sources will facilitate the processes of Africa's technologization. In 2009, only 9 million users on the continent had uninterrupted access to the Internet, while in 2019, there were already over 522 million⁸.

Russia actively develops cooperation with African media resources; the broadcasts of "RT" cover more than half of the African continent's airwaves. Sometimes Russia provides technological tools to friendly countries for conducting journalistic reports and inclusions; this practice was observed in Eritrea.

The main narratives of Russian propaganda in Africa are:

1. All of Africa's troubles stem from former metropolises.
2. Russia fights terrorists, while former metropolises cooperate with them.
3. NATO places biolabs in African countries.
4. Western humanitarian aid causes serious health problems.
5. Grain from Ukraine under the grain initiative ignores the impoverished countries of Africa.

Russia's information-psychological operations in Africa can be conditionally divided into anti-French, anti-Western, and pro-Russian, sometimes blurring the lines between them. To consider specific situations, let's take: Russian political technologists' interference in the elections in Madagascar in 2018; an anti-French campaign in the media against the "Barkhane" operation; a campaign against Western vaccines supplied to Africa during the coronavirus pandemic; misinformation about the coup in the Republic of Congo during the UN General Assembly summit in September 2023.

The elections in Madagascar interested Russia primarily for economic reasons. Political technologists associated with the AFRIC analytical center, which is linked to Yevgeny Prigozhin, sought the election of a pro-Russian president with whom it would be easier to negotiate the extraction of chromium ore. Russian specialists tried to play on anti-French sentiments, sponsoring rallies in front of the French embassy in Antananarivo. They even involved Kemi Seba, who delivered a speech against French influence in the country. However, closer to the elections, political technologists withdrew their support and decided, at the last moment when the election results were already evident, to support Andry Rajoelina, who was elected president.

The activity of Russian political technologists demonstrated that Russia poorly understood the electoral sentiments of Malagasy society, leading to a failure in this election campaign.

⁸ Limonier and Laruelle, Russia's African Toolkit

Nevertheless, this was the first such operation by Russia openly supporting its candidate in African elections, and examining this case is crucial, as Russia may adjust its unsuccessful approaches in other countries on the continent, especially with the upcoming elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo in December 2023.

The Russian campaign against the anti-terrorist operation "Barkhane". Anti-terrorism measures under the auspices of France in West Africa (primarily in Mali) have repeatedly faced condemnation in local societies. France has been accused of conspiring with Islamist terrorists, against whom they were supposed to fight. These sentiments were spread by Russian propaganda as well. The campaign unfolded not on the streets, as in the case of Madagascar, but on pro-Russian TV channels in the region and on social media. The Ivorian channel "Afrique Média" circulated a video depicting a captured Wagner PMC fighter in the hands of terrorists from Mali, with US and French flags in the background, sending a clear signal to viewers about the sources of financing terrorist groups in West Africa. The video was shared by about 23 pro-Russian accounts on the "Meta" network, reaching 1.8 million users.

In social media, French military personnel were depicted as snakes, rats, and zombies⁹, which attempted to seize Mali and steal national natural resources, while Russian mercenaries, on the contrary, came to the aid of the Malians. Something similar was practiced in the CAR, where Russian militants erect monuments as a sign of gratitude for protecting the civilian population in the conditions of hostilities. Russians resorted to openly fabricated accusations against France of mass killings in Mali near their own military base – the so-called Gossi debacle.

The anti-French campaign bore fruit, although from the very beginning it developed almost amateurishly by local activists. Russia's popularity in West Africa grew not only in Mali but also in neighboring Burkina Faso – both states experienced pro-Russian military coups (Assimi Goïta seized power in Mali in 2021, and in Burkina Faso in 2022, it was Ibrahim Traoré, who at the last "Russia-Africa" summit had the introductory word from African delegates. In his own country, he has already become a cult figure. The leader of the junta is compared to the national hero of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara). In 2023, echoes of Russia's popularity reached another country in the region – Niger, where the presidential guard overthrew the France-oriented leader Mohamed Bazoum. It is worth noting that at the end of August this year, a military coup took place in Gabon, which was also a zone of French colonial influence, and the ruling Bongo family was considered the core of the neocolonial influence system "Françafrique". Coups in Niger and Gabon had many similarities, but they cannot be called pro-Russian – the reason was rather internal conflicts between civilian leaders and the military.

⁹ Le rat, le serpent et les hyènes: en Afrique, la propagande russe passe par les dessins animés/ AFP

Medical PSYOPs occupy a special place in Russia's toolkit. Alongside traditional accusations towards NATO regarding the placement of biolabs in African countries (sometimes spread by small pro-Russian Telegram channels Russosphere and Faire Tes Recherches), especially Russian propaganda intensified during the coronavirus crisis. Primarily, Russia sought to undermine Western humanitarian initiatives to provide the continent with vaccines against the pandemic pathogen. Various sources on social media spread messages that American vaccines cause serious damage to the recipients' immune system. The majority of messages came from phones registered in Nigeria to users in the Democratic Republic of the Congo¹⁰.

Disinformation about the coup in the Republic of Congo emerged on September 17, 2023, precisely one day before the start of the United Nations General Assembly summit in New York. A series of pro-Russian Telegram channels began spreading messages that a state coup was taking place in Congo led by the military of the presidential guard (while the long-time president of the Republic of Congo, Denis Sassou-Nguesso, was heading to the U.S. for the UN summit). The sources sowed panic and reported that Congolese military forces were taking control of key objects. However, in reality, the information turned out to be entirely fabricated, quickly dispelled by the president's office.

These pro-Russian sources primarily sought to harm the gathering of UN state leaders. Numerous media outlets drew parallels between the "Russia-Africa" summit, which proceeded without incidents in African countries. Of course, except for the coup in Niger, which was advantageous for Russia considering Moscow's level of popular approval (protests with Russian tricolors in the streets of Niamey), as well as the support shown by pro-Russian military regimes in Mali and Burkina Faso to the newly appointed leader of the Niger junta, Abdourahamane Tchiani.

France attempted to counter Russia on its own disinformation turf, but it resulted in a scandal with the company "Meta" due to the creation of a network of fake accounts. The Pentagon also tried a similar approach in practice in 2004, launching the service "Magharebia," aimed at promoting the public image of the U.S. in the Maghreb region. However, this only damaged the image of Americans in the Middle East¹¹.

Russian disinformation in Latin America

The growth of popularity of Russia and Putin in Latin America was observed during the years 2015-2020, although during this time Moscow continued the occupation of Crimea and

¹⁰ Security, Soft Power and Regime Support: Spheres of Russian Influence in Africa. Tony Blair Institute for global change

¹¹ Russian disinformation in Africa: no door on this barn/ Dan Whitman

participated in military actions against the Armed Forces of Ukraine in the eastern regions of Ukraine. The full-scale invasion to Ukraine undermined the level of Kremlin's favorability¹², however, the West failed with the tilt of the region towards the support of Ukraine. Latin Americans mainly expressed neutrality towards the events in Ukraine since February 2022. In Mexico, according to a survey by the *El Financiero* newspaper conducted in March 2022, during the peak period of growing anti-Russian sentiments worldwide, such sentiments were held by over 70% of citizens¹³. Neutrality always serves in favor of the aggressor, as then the question of an inconvenient and unpopular war disappears from the media pages, so the annoying narrative does not need to be constantly suppressed.

Another positive aspect of Russian, particularly informational, influence in Latin America is the number of states that have imposed sanctions on Russia – only one small Costa Rica. However, this does not mean that support for the Kremlin in Latin America is total. In the Western bloc of states, especially the United States, there are close political regimes in the region. Here, one can mention Ecuador, which, however, refrains from a sanction policy against Russia due to a powerful dependence on the Russian export market (Russia ranks third in the structure of non-oil goods exports): over 1 billion dollars annually come from the sale of bananas, flowers, and shrimp to Russia. Also, Ecuador is heavily dependent on the supply of mineral fertilizers from the Russian Federation (39% of imports).

In general, the problem of dependence on fertilizers from Russia is the collective burden of Latin America: Russia provides 22% of the region's imports¹⁴. The Kremlin also develops relations in Latin America along the line of Rosatom, in particular, a number of projects the company implemented in Bolivia thanks to the patronage of the long-time ex-president Evo Morales. Russian political technologists took care of the image of the Bolivian leader (the Autonomous Non-Profit Organization "Dialog", associated with Vladimir Tabak. The well-known propaganda Russian internet publication "Readovka" is part of the "Dialog" ANO.

The information support for Russia's economic initiatives in the region is provided by the agencies "Sputnik Mundo" and "Actualidad RT". More than 50% of the views of materials from these Russian media are attributed to Mexico, Argentina, and Venezuela. Active media are also present on online platforms: the Actualidad RT page on the "X" network (formerly "Twitter") occasionally ranks in the top ten for views at the continental level.

Anti-Western media broadcasting in Latin America partly try to cooperate with Russian media for broader information coverage. The most notable among them are the Venezuelan

¹² Russian Influence Campaigns in Latin America/ United States institute of peace

¹³ Los mexicanos creen que la guerra alcanzará a sus bolsillos/ Alejandro Moreno / *El Financiero*

¹⁴ ¿Otro dano colateral? Disputa del mercado latinoamericano de fertilizantes/ Jameson Mencias/ Observatorio Economico Latinoamericano

TeleSur and the Iranian HispanTV. Actualidad RT has agreements with these channels for content exchange.

In addition, Russia has formed a cohort of Spanish-speaking journalists and politicians who set the tone for anti-Western sentiments in Latin America: 1 – Alexis Castillo (of Colombian origin) – an RT commentator who died near the village of Pisky during shelling at the end of October 2023. 2 – Pablo Jofre Leal (Chilean), who has a popular blog and occasionally appears on the platforms of "Sputnik Mundo" and "Actualidad RT." 3 – Inna Afinogenova (Russian). A former RT employee who, in 2022, left the channel because of her stance against the war in Ukraine. She has now moved to work at the Spanish Canal RED, created by Pablo Iglesias, the leader of the radical Spanish left party "Podemos".

Russia also operates through various cultural initiatives – the Latin American Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences; the Russian Council of International Affairs; the Houses of Russia (so-called Russian Cultural Houses) in Buenos Aires, Lima, and Mexico City. Essential for information cooperation between Russia and Latin America is the consortium NK SESLA, which unites several structures in the field of information security, intelligence, cryptography, and surveillance.

The narratives of Russian propaganda in Latin America:

1. The USA provokes a food crisis worldwide by imposing sanctions on Russian goods and fertilizers. Emphasizing that the catastrophe can reach biblical proportions, using the deep religiosity of Latin Americans, as they became a stronghold of the Counter-Reformation in the 16th century.
2. The USA applies the same blockade measures against Russia as against Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela – a clear and familiar parallel is drawn on the continent.
3. The USA supports Nazis in Ukraine who commit crimes much more brutal than the Russians – a clear playing to left-wing political sentiments, as the ideological conflict between fascists and communists became one of the leitmotifs of the ideological race of the 20th century.
4. The USA pressures the media (blocking RT and Sputnik), but at the same time talks about freedom of speech.
5. The goals of the USA in Latin America are the theft of resources, and in Ukraine - the extraction of titanium.
6. In Argentina, propaganda adapts to the local context and draws parallels between the wars of Ukraine and Russia, as well as Britain and Argentina. Argentines mock the demands of the British for Russia to leave Ukraine, as Britain still occupies the

Falkland Islands. Interestingly, a similar shifting of narratives was observed in Africa, specifically, for example, among the people of the Tigray province in Ethiopia¹⁵, as well as the Tuaregs in Mali, who in the information field drew parallels between themselves and Ukrainians fighting against aggression. Instead, in the place of Russia in this war, imperialist bloggers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo positioned themselves, who justified the need to occupy Rwanda through historical appeals¹⁶, supposedly due to supporting rebels from the M23 group.

Important channel for ideological indoctrination in Latin America is Kremlin ideologist Aleksandr Dugin, under the influence of whom organizations such as the Center for Syncretic Studies (authoritarian pseudo-analytical center) in Belgrade were created, within which the publication Fort Russ News operated earlier. Both organizations ceased their activities after the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Another structure of a similar type is New Resistance (Nova Resistência) in Brazil. It positions itself as a neo-fascist paramilitary organization inspired by the ideas of the "Fourth Political Theory"¹⁷.

Aside from formal enlightenment activity, New Resistance engages in recruiting militants for the war against Ukraine. Recruitment is conducted through social networks by the organization's leader, Rafael Machado. A notable case is the Brazilian militant Lusvarghi, who participated in battles for the DAP on the side of separatists. In 2016, Lusvarghi was arrested by the SBU, and he was sentenced to 13 years in prison for involvement in a terrorist organization. However, after three years, in 2019, Rafael Lusvarghi was exchanged for Ukrainian prisoners of war. Meanwhile, a scandal involving the recruitment of mercenaries recently erupted in Cuba when local law enforcement exposed a human trafficking network that was involved in sending Cuban mercenaries to war on the side of Russia. Recruiters operated through social networks, primarily WhatsApp, and the key figure in the network is identified as the Russian historian Vladimir Shkunov¹⁸.

The approaches of Russian propaganda to disinformation vividly manifested during the wave of protests that swept through Latin America between 2018 and 2022. Disturbances in Western countries were covered much more actively by Russian sources than those in anti-Western ones. During the protests in Colombia in 2019, Russian media spread 310 messages (approximately 6.5 per day), in Chile (2019-2020) – 3 each day, in Ecuador in 2022 – 4.1 daily. In contrast, regarding the upheavals in Nicaragua (2018), which had a much larger scale (over 350 deaths), Russian sources dedicated 0.3 messages per day to this protest; in Bolivia (2019) – 1.4.

¹⁵ Gebremeskel Gebemariam/ X

¹⁶ Le King Né Ngunza Kongo/ Facebook

¹⁷ Exporting Pro-Kremlin Disinformation: The Case of Nova Resistência in Brazil/ U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

¹⁸ Quién recluta a los mercenarios cubanos en Rusia/ CubaNet

Russia attempted to interfere in the electoral process on the continent, primarily in Mexico, siding with López Obrador or in Colombia in support of Gustavo Petro. In both cases, Russia sought to act through bots, a significant portion of which had Venezuelan origins, as well as official media. Interference in the elections in Brazil in 2018 and 2022 was less pronounced from Russia's side, as RT does not have a Portuguese-language branch, unlike Sputnik. Moreover, in 2018, Russian sources expressed technical support for Jair Bolsonaro, while in 2022, they tried to balance between him and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, as both were considered comfortable partners for Russia.

Asian Vector of Russia's Information-Psychological Campaigns

From all the above, it can be concluded that the popularity of Russian media resources and narratives is observed only where there is a corresponding anti-Western environment, established contacts in the past, and a related cultural space (primarily in the linguistic aspect, as propaganda is systematically successful where its messages reach wide masses better). In the Asian space, despite the anti-Western orientation of the pro-Iranian axis, China, North Korea, and India, it is difficult to label this region as hostile to Western values. It is worth noting that in the United States, there is a powerful propaganda cultural platform on the continent, as well as powerful allies considered the driving force of pro-Western Asian cultural policy for export – primarily referring to Japan (J-pop, anime, film industry, literature, media in the entertainment sector) and South Korea (K-pop, television, and film).

Therefore, Russian information-psychological operations are primarily aimed at the problematic audience of Asia – the Middle East and Central Asia. This is facilitated by the comfortable linguistic situation, as the Middle East is predominantly an Arabic-speaking environment, so the channel "RT Arabic" (روسيا اليوم) does not lose its effectiveness. In contrast, in Central Asia, the level of understanding of the Russian language is high, and there are numerous diasporas of ethnic Russians. All this creates favorable conditions for the transmission of pro-Kremlin propaganda narratives literally from the first-hand by the powerful federal channels. For example, according to a 2017 social survey, in Kyrgyzstan, 40% of the population preferred watching television in Russian, while 50% preferred Kyrgyz. Regarding the popularity of TV channels, overall, in Kyrgyzstan, the Russian "First Channel" took the third place after the national broadcaster KTRK and a music channel, while in the capital, Bishkek, the "First Channel" topped the popularity ratings among viewers¹⁹. The threat from Russian media is particularly felt by the authorities of Kazakhstan, as since the beginning of the Russian invasion into Ukraine, Moscow has exerted serious pressure on the

¹⁹ Експлуатація уязвимостей: особливості російської пропаганди в Центральній Азії/ Центр дослідження армії, конверсії та роззброєння

leader of Central Asia. A campaign in the media has been launched against Kazakhstan. Russia has repeatedly accused the local government of suppressing the Russian-speaking population (the diaspora of ethnic Russians in Kazakhstan comprises about 15% of the country's population – around 3 million people). Allegations of limiting the use of the Russian language in Kazakhstan were spread by pro-Russian channels on the Telegram network, while aggressive attacks against Kazakhstan increased in frequency from Russian propagandists. Tigran Keosayan gained notorious fame for his speech targeting the Kazakhstani government.

The complex relationship between Astana and Moscow has reached the level of public interactions between the presidents. Specifically, Putin repeatedly mispronounced the name of Kasym-Jomart Tokayev during joint appearances, attempting to swallow parts of the letters or simply abbreviating it. Such behavior might be attributed to chance, but it occurred multiple times under various circumstances, suggesting a pattern. Distorting Tokayev's name can be considered part of Russia's global system of information-psychological operations against Kazakhstan.

The narratives of Russian propaganda in Central Asia:

1. Suppression of Russian-speaking population in countries with broad ethnic representation.
2. Placement of NATO biolabs in Central Asian countries.
3. Discrediting democratic forces and institutions that may potentially have an anti-Russian political agenda.
4. Narratives against historical memory; distortion of historical reality regarding liberation anti-Soviet movements in Central Asia; spreading myths about collaborators.

In the Middle East, Russia has been a long-standing player. Even in Soviet times, Moscow practiced ideological indoctrination of local anti-Western movements, which resulted in the formulation of a syncretic practice combining socialism with Arab nationalism, the stronghold of which became the Ba'ath movement. With the collapse of the USSR, Russia's contacts with regional allies diminished. Moscow fully returned to Middle Eastern political play in 2015 through the involvement of Russian military (primarily personnel from the Russian Aerospace Forces and mercenaries) in the civil war in Syria. This conflict became a means for the Kremlin to strengthen its strategic positions, as it opened access to two military bases in Syria (Hmeimim and Tartus) and allowed the launch of one of the main Russian information myths – the fight against global terrorism.

Syria also served as a training ground for the simulation of future military actions in Ukraine: campaigns of targeted missile strike with Kalibr guided missiles were practiced specifically on the Syrian front. Russian commanders, who were to hone their skills in managing troops

in combat conditions, passed through the Middle East. In terms of the information component, the situation in the Middle East allows Russia to manipulate the topic of Ukraine in the media space – primarily notable is the campaign to discredit Kyiv regarding the sponsorship of Hamas terrorists with Western weapons.

The Russian war against ISIS in Syria is a Russian information myth that was inflated from 2015 by propaganda initially and later picked up at the level of the President of the Russian Federation, who declared complete victory over ISIS in 2017. Russia's intervention in Syria was initially presented as a fight against Islamist terrorists – a clear signal to the domestic audience, as it was necessary to somehow explain the reasons for Russia's involvement in military actions in the Middle East. Here, a well-established narrative played out, cultivated since the 1990s regarding Islamist terrorists, against whom Russia (in the First Chechen War) and then pro-Russian Chechen forces (in the Second) fought on the territory of the North Caucasus.

During the Syrian campaign, Russia claimed constant air attacks against terrorists, although, as numerous data showed, over 90% of Russian Aerospace Forces strikes targeted infrastructure or positions of anti-Assad rebels from the Free Syrian Army (الجيش السوري الحر)²⁰. The data also demonstrated that ISIS terrorists or affiliates of the Al-Qaeda organization "Jabhat al-Nusra" (جبهة النصرة) were losing territory only where the Western coalition forces were fighting against them.

At the same time, Russia spread the narrative that ISIS was a project of the West, supported by the Syrian opposition, while Russia, in turn, was opposing the global terrorist conspiracy. This was not successful. Military defeats of the Syrian opposition overlapped with the information campaign, so opposition forces soon lost support and were completely discredited. Publicly, the conflict in Syria boiled down to a choice between terrorists and the Assad regime. Russia successfully implemented a similar narrative during the Second Chechen War, simplifying the conflict along the lines of pro-Russian Chechens versus Chechen terrorists, which became the dominant narrative during the Second War.

Disinformation regarding Ukraine supplying Western weapons to HAMAS became Russia's informational bomb in the early days of the new war between Gaza Strip militants and Israel. Publications about the discovery of Ukrainian weapons in Hamas hands appeared the day after terrorists attacked Israeli regions bordering Gaza. Russian media spread reports that Ukrainian grenade launchers and grenades were in the hands of terrorists. To support these claims, Russians turned to U.S. Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene, known for her anti-Ukrainian stance, support for Donald Trump, and promotion of conspiracy theories (such as QAnon and the existence of secret U.S. biolabs in Ukraine).

²⁰ The Nonwar on Daesh/ Florence Gaub

The main goal of this information-psychological operation (PSYOPS) was to undermine international support for Ukraine in the West, as the actions of Hamas were primarily condemned by Ukrainian allies in the "Ramstein" coalition. This operation aimed to disrupt the supply of new weapons, already complicated by war fatigue and political issues in the U.S. Congress, whose legislative activities were almost paralyzed due to interparty and inter-factional conflicts.

Information-Psychological Front of Russia in Oceania

Oceania has never held strategic interest for Russia, as the region is distant from global centers of power and lacks strategic resources. Russia's methods of penetration into the South Pacific are entirely hybrid, relying on the promotion of Russian narratives in the media and the support of a sizable and active Russian diaspora.

Despite the absence of strategic interests, the Kremlin has certain situational interests in Oceania. Primarily, this relates to circumventing sanctions (thanks to the accessible maritime flag registration of the Marshall Islands) and legitimizing the policy of regional destabilization (the Oceanian state of Nauru still diplomatically recognizes the separatist entities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia).

The scale of Russia's information campaigns in Oceania is very limited, primarily due to the prevalence of media content from the United States, Japan, and New Zealand, which predominantly disseminate a pro-Western narrative, including regarding the war in Ukraine. Secondly, there is an absence of influential information networks or pro-Russian proxies. Indeed, the notable resources include only the Miklouho-Maclay Foundation in Papua New Guinea and the Russkiy Mir Foundation, which, however, find success mainly among the Russian ethnic diaspora in Australia.

The Russkiy Mir Foundation has dedicated a series of materials to anti-Western and pro-Russian protests in Australia, particularly regarding Covid-19 vaccination policies. Subsequently, these actions transformed into a platform for spreading anti-Ukrainian sentiments. In July 2023, an article titled "Russians in Australia Protest Against Violations of Their Rights" was published on the Foundation's website²¹, where the situation of Russians compared with "Jews in Nazi Germany"²². This was stated by the pro-Russian propagandist and "ataman of the Adelaide Cossacks", Aleksandr Kozlov. Also involved in organizing the rally was the "ataman of the Sydney Cossacks", Semyon Boykov, who in 2022 convened the "Z-Drive" in Sydney in support of the Russian war against Ukraine.

²¹ Russians in Australia protest against violation of their rights. Russkiy Mir Foundation, 2023

²² Look previous

Conclusions

1. Information-psychological operations (PSYOPS) are comprehensive measures to influence the human psyche through information manipulations. Implementing PSYOPS practices allows achieving both situational and long-term goals. Such operations are primarily capable of rapidly influencing the moods of human populations, inciting unrest, causing panic, or simply altering the societal tone.
2. Russian propaganda has achieved significant success in recent years. This is evidenced by the level of support for Russia or opposition to anti-Russian initiatives in the UN and the number of states imposing sanctions on Moscow. Despite the aggression against Ukraine in 2014, in certain regions of the Global South, Russia and its leadership have gained popularity between 2015 and 2020.
3. The main propaganda tools used by modern Russia abroad include:
 - State media (primarily "RT" and "Sputnik").
 - Foreign proxy sources and agents of influence abroad.
 - Technological companies in computer technology and data science ("Yandex" and "Kaspersky Lab").
 - Private disinformation groups of political technologies (structures of Yevgeny Prigozhin or Konstantin Malofeev).
 - Official government institutions and their representations (embassies, religious establishments).
4. The main features of the Russian disinformation and PSYOPS system are as follows:
 - Multichannel nature.
 - Speed, repeatability, flow.
 - Ignoring objective reality and facts.
 - Impartiality before consistency.
 - Adaptability to the environment.
5. Russia is popular in Global South countries because its anti-Western ideas, not always met with hostile resonance, offer an alternative to Western hegemony and dominance. Russia, in turn, penetrates the Global South to strengthen its sovereignty and eliminate those perceived by the Kremlin as threats.

6. The key stages of Russia's information-psychological pressure on Global South countries include:

- Russia's intervention in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Assad in 2015.
- UN sanctions on sending Russian instructors to the Central African Republic and the lifting of the embargo on the supply of light weapons (resulting in an image improvement campaign for Russia and PMC Wagner mercenaries, affecting Russia's perception in French-speaking countries in West Africa and opening the way for the intervention of Russian militants in Mali).

7. Conditions for the success of Russian PSYOPSs in Global South countries include:

- Difficult socio-economic situations attributable to the harmful influence of the West.
- Strengthening of terrorists and insurgent groups.
- Rooted anti-Western sentiments.
- Support from pro-Russian sources of mass information locally.
- Presence of pro-Russian influence groups (local voices or representatives of the diaspora).

© Think Tank ADASTRA

Author:
Anton Kucherenko

The logo for ADASTRA, consisting of the word "ADASTRA" in white, uppercase, sans-serif font, centered within a solid blue rectangular background.

The information and views set out in this study are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official opinion of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V. or the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine.

Think Tank ADASTRA
Phone: +380954592954
E-mail: adastra@adastra.org.ua
<https://adastra.org.ua/>